GOOD HEALTH - IT'S YOUR CHOICE

Let me begin with a premise: that most of our behaviour and activities are actually strategies designed to reduce stress. Before you think I don't get out much or that I've been doing stress counseling for too long, let me explain.

What happens when we experience stress or feel upset? Some of us grab our favourite comfort food or light up a cigarette. Several people tell me the first thing they do when they get home at night is pour themselves a good, stiff drink to help them unwind from the day. Others withdraw and isolate themselves. Still others "dump their bucket" on arriving home, ventilating at length about the upsetting day they've just had. Some go out for a run to release built-up tensions. Then there are folks who veg out in front of the TV every evening.

All of these (and this is only a partial list) are ways that patients tell me they cope with stress. And while some are healthier or more constructive than others, all of them work to some extent or people wouldn't keep doing them.

But let's go further. Why do people leave early to get to meetings or appointments if not to avoid the stress of rushing and/or arriving late? Angry outbursts are a way that many people vent frustration. Crying and laughing are also tension relievers. For a lot of people, worrying is a subconscious strategy that they use to deal with difficult situations. In fact, some individuals use worry as a conscious strategy to ward off trouble ("If I worry about it, then it won't happen.") Often people use procrastination to put off unpleasant activities or situations. Most of what we do can be looked upon as a coping strategy, conscious or unconscious.

If this premise is true, then we should ask ourselves two questions:

1. Do our strategies work?
2. Are they causing any other problems?

Let's compare "bad coping strategies" and "good coping" strategies

Bad Coping	Good Coping
Smoking	Nutrition
Alcohol	Exercise
Over-eating	Relaxation
Drugs	Recreation
Withdrawing	Assertiveness
Self-Pity	Time-Outs
Blaming	Humour

Stress is one of the leading causes of ill health in our society. But, as if that's not bad enough, many of our coping strategies are, in themselves, unhealthy. So we're hit with a double whammy. Conversely, by shifting from "bad" coping strategies to "good" ones, we can achieve two benefits.

1. They're better stress-reducers.
2. They improve our health.

If we think of our bad habits as not just self-destructive lifestyle choices, but actually misguided attempts to relieve stress, then we can start to look for better strategies that are effective stress relievers and healthier for us overall.

So the next time you have a glass of wine to help you relax in a social situation, or compulsively chomp on potato chips to reduce anxiety, stop and consider that you're actually trying to deal with stress. Then think of alternative ways to achieve the same result - without the negative side effects.